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TAGS: PREL KS KN

SUBJECT: ROKG TO SEND RICE TO NORTH KOREA AS FLOOD RELIEF

REF: A. SEOUL 2729
1B. SEOUL 2684

Classified By: A/DCM Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) On August 19, Assistant Minister of Unification Lee Kwan-sei told A/DCM that the ROKG planned to announce the following day that it had decided to provide North Korea with 100,000 metric tons of rice as well as some reconstruction equipment as part of a flood relief package. This follows Seoul's August 11 announcement that it would provide 10 billion South Korean won (about USD 10.4 million) of matching flood relief assistance through NGOs (ref A). Lee said that the damage in North Korea was great, and cited WFP estimates that the North had lost around 100,000 tons of rice production in the floods, which Seoul was prepared to reimburse. In terms of the damage, Lee dismissed some NGO claims of tens of thousand of deaths, and pointed to media reports from Japan of hundreds of deaths and thousands of missing as more credible. Lee claimed that the emergency flood aid does not alter the fundamental ROKG view of the North Korean missile launches in July and Seoul's decision to cut off food and fertilizer aid until the North returned to Six Party Talks. END SUMMARY.

ROKG TO PROVIDE 100,000 TONS OF EMERGENCY RICE

12. (C) Assistant Minister of Unification Policy and Public Relations Lee Kwan-sei asked to meet with the A/DCM on August 19 to inform the USG of the ROKG decision to provide 100,000 metric tons of rice to North Korea and some reconstruction equipment via Red Cross channels as the second element of its flood relief assistance program. The decision came after Unification Minister Lee Jeong-seok this week met with South Korean Red Cross officials and NGOs to assess the situation in North Korea and after the North signaled that it would accept South Korean Red Cross assistance. Last week on August 11, the Unification Ministry announced that the ROKG had decided to provide the North with 10 billion South Korean won (around USD 10.4 million) matching NGO relief assistance (ref A). Lee Kwan-sei said that he wanted to meet with the A/DCM because the ROKG planned to announce its decision of rice and equipment assistance the following day (August 20).

¶3. (C) Lee explained that while no one knew the exact amount of damage or causalities in North Korea, the North suffered a lot of damage. Lee showed the A/DCM satellite images of one village that appeared to have been washed away by flood waters and of dams in North Korea that had been breached and destroyed. The WFP had estimated that the floods had caused the North to lose 100,000 metric tons worth of rice production. While the ROKG had initially provided matching funds for NGO relief assistance, the latest information showed that the North needed more help to rebuild from the flood and more assistance than South Koreans NGOs could provide. For example, the North needed cranes and bulldozers to repair the damaged dams.

¶4. (C) Asked to quantify the damage in North Korea, Lee pointed to the Choson Sinbo, a pro-North Korean newspaper, that reported on August 8 that July's heavy rainfall caused "serious damage," with 549 persons dead, 295 missing, and 3,043 injured. Lee said that the North had previously used the Choson Sinbo as a vehicle to get out its message, so these numbers were the most authoritative report to date, a claim that a World Food Program representative had told us on August 8 (ref B). He also dismissed a report from Good Friends, an NGO that works on human and economic rights for North Koreans, that claimed that 10,000 North Koreans have died as a result of the floods and that 1.3 to 1.5 million were displaced.

ROKG: NO CHANGE IN POSITION ON DPRK MISSILE LAUNCHES

¶5. (C) Lee insisted that despite the ROKG's decision to take a two-prong approach of (1) matching South Korean NGO relief assistance and (2) sending rice and equipment through the Red Cross, Seoul had not changed its position on the North Korean missile launches. The South Korean position remained that the South would continue to suspend bilateral rice and fertilizer assistance to the North. This flood assistance package, instead, was emergency humanitarian assistance. Lee said that South Korean political and civic circles agreed on the need to help North Korean flood victims.

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